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a **NEW** short story by
JACK RITCHIE

Being one of the judges, especially the senior judge, of the Fifty States Beauty Contest wasn't as easy and pleasant a task as it seemed. In fact, it was downright perilous . . .

Jack Ritchie is one of the most prolific and most admired short-story writers in the mystery field. He has written and published more than 400 short stories, and is going stronger than ever . . .

BEAUTY IS AS BEAUTY DOES

by **JACK RITCHIE**

When I noticed the lavender envelope protruding from under the door of my suite, I picked it up. Inside I found a single typewritten sheet of paper.

Dear Mr. Walker: If I am not selected Miss Fifty States in the finals tomorrow, I promise that I will kill you. I mean this quite seriously. My entire life would be ruined and so I might just as well murder you. I think I would even enjoy it.

I showed the note to Stubbins and McGee.

McGee rubbed his jaw. "Now that's peculiar."

I regarded him coldly. "That is clearly the understatement of the year. It is a threat to murder me."

"I mean that the note isn't signed. How are you supposed to know which girl to vote for?"

I read the note again. "Hmm. You are quite right, McGee. I didn't notice it at first. Then what the hell is the point of sending me the note in the first place?"

McGee gave it thought. "Possibly she just forgot to sign her name."

McGee, Stubbins, and I are the three judges of the Miss Fifty States Beauty Contest. However, since I am the senior judge and

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© 1977 by Jack Ritchie.

McGee and Stubbins were likely to defer to any decision I might make, I was obviously the person to influence if someone wanted to win the contest.

"You *do* want to find out who wrote that note, don't you?" Stubbins asked.

"Of course. But there are *ten* finalists."

Stubbins quickly paged through the files of the contestants, apparently searching for one item in particular. He put three folders aside. "There we are."

I had been looking over his shoulder. "There we are what?"

"You will notice that the note is typed," Stubbins said. "There is not a single typing error and the entire message is nicely centered on the sheet of paper. In other words, the typist is obviously not a novice at the machine." He indicated the folders. "These three girls are the only finalists who can type—Miss Wisconsin, Miss New York, and Miss South Carolina."

I frowned. "I still can't figure out that lack of a signature. Could she actually have forgotten?"

McGee brightened. "Maybe she first wanted to see how you would *react* to a threat, even if it was anonymous. If you are frightened and intimidated, she will press home the advantage and make herself known."

"She will be disappointed," I said. "I am neither frightened nor intimidated."

"Ah, yes," McGee said. "But suppose you *pretend* that you are?"

I saw his point. "Very well, summon the three girls here."

McGee and Stubbins accomplished the errand and brought back the girls and their chaperones. I had the latter remain in an anteroom while we spoke to the girls and showed them the note.

Gretchen—Miss Wisconsin—handed it back to me and smiled sweetly. "Why isn't it signed?"

"I don't know. Perhaps the writer forgot?" I gazed at the three of them and got innocent silence.

Olivia—Miss New York—could smile sweetly too. "Why pick on us three? There are *ten* finalists."

Stubbins beamed his information. "You three are the only ones who can type."

I allowed my hands to tremble slightly as I folded the note and returned it to my pocket. "I don't see why anybody wants to kill me just because of this contest. I have been nice to all of you, haven't I?"

"Of course, Mr. Walker," Melissa—Miss South Carolina—said. "You've been a dear, sweet, intelligent man."

I nodded. "It's quite a difficult job to judge a beauty contest. All I'm trying to do is be fair." I used my handkerchief to wipe my forehead. "Now I want whoever wrote this note to think it over carefully. You wouldn't *really* want to kill me, now would you?"

Behind them, McGee lifted a book a foot above the table top and raised a questioning eyebrow.

I read his message and nodded almost imperceptibly.

He dropped the book and it made a loud bang.

I leaped wildly. "What was that?"

McGee apologized. "I'm sorry, Mr. Walker. The book just slipped."

I laughed nervously. "That sounded rather like a pistol shot." I wiped my face again. "Now, girls, I just want you to remember that I am your friend. Honestly and truly your friend. I'm here to help you in any way I can. If there is anything troubling you, I would be only too happy—yes, *eager*—to do whatever I can."

It was nearly nine o'clock that evening and I was alone when there came a knock on my door.

I found a huge young man with a look of determination in his eyes. "Are you Mr. Walker? One of the judges of the Miss Fifty States Beauty Contest?"

I nodded cautiously.

"This has got to stop," he announced firmly.

"What has got to stop?"

"I am not going to let you crown Gretchen Miss Fifty States."

"And why not?"

"Because I intend to marry her."

I sighed. "Come in and sit down."

He found a chair. "I just can't have her gawked at."

"She has been gawked at from Sheboygan to Milwaukee."

"I know. But this time it will be on nation-wide television. Can't you just imagine what all those millions of men will be *thinking* when they see her in that skimpy bikini?" He brushed sandy-colored hair from his forehead. "Gretchen and I grew up together. We went to the same grade school, the same high school. We took Biology together."

"You were that close?"

He breathed heavily. "I shouldn't have let it go on and on. First it was the Montmorency Cherry Queen, then the Sebago Potato Princess, and on to the McIntosh Apple Darling. I thought that

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He seemed quite desperate. "Do you realize what will happen to her if she wins this contest? She'll be famous and meet all kinds of rich men and celebrities and get married a half a dozen times before she's through. And she'll be dieting all the time and that isn't healthy. When she weighed a hundred and forty she was always cheerful and light-hearted. Have you come to a decision yet about who's going to be Miss Fifty States?"

"I am still giving it thought."

He rose and hovered over me. "Mr. Walker, if you pick Gretchen, I swear I'll kill you. I won't have any reason for going on anyway." He paused at the door. "The last time I went trap-shooting, I got ninety-nine out of one hundred."

I took optimistic comfort in that he had missed at least one.

When he was gone, I decided I needed a drink. I was making it when there was another knock on the door.

It was Olivia.

I glanced past her. "Where's your chaperone?"

She shrugged. "I got some sleeping pills from the hotel doctor and accidentally spiked her milk." She closed the door behind her and a moment later I was a bit astonished to find that we were sitting side by side on the sofa. Her raven-black hair seemed to exude an aggressive fragrance.

She showed the whitest of teeth. "Mr. Walker, I can see that a man of your educated type likes a woman with brains and a lot of culture. How did you like my painting?"

As her contribution to the talent segment of our contest, Olivia had entered one of her paintings of what was very possibly a bridge in the moonlight entitled *Spanscape*.

She leaned closer. "You've been so nice to all of us, and I, for one, am very appreciative."

I cleared my throat. "Appreciative is an adjective."

Her fingers crawled about the back of my neck. "I could be ever so grateful for any little favor you might do for me tomorrow, Mr. Walker. So very grateful." Her eyes were close. Her lips were close. As a matter of fact, all of her was close.

The memory of my Puritan ancestors pulled me to my feet. "Young woman," I said sternly, "that won't do you a bit of good."

She studied me for a few seconds and then shrugged. "All right, then I'll play it straight. I was the one who wrote you that note and I meant every word of it."

I moved to the phone. "I am going to call the police."

She smiled. "Go ahead if you want to. But I'll just deny that I said anything at all. It will be your word against mine." She put a gleam into her eyes. "You're as good as dead if I'm not Miss Fifty States by this time tomorrow."

She swept out of the door.

Fifteen minutes later I had finished my drink and was working on the second when I had to answer the door again.

It was Melissa.

She carried what appeared to be a liquor bottle gift-wrapped. "Just a token for all the nice things you've done for little old helpless me. It's really good bourbon."

"Where is your chaperone?" I asked routinely.

"The dear thing's fast asleep. Just drank her milk and conked out." She put the bottle on the table. "We won't drink any of this now. I know the rules and I wouldn't want to be accused of trying to influence you in any way. So we'll just save the bottle for a *private* victory celebration tomorrow in case I somehow *happen* to become Miss Fifty States."

Her green eyes looked into mine. "You know, you look so distinguished and educated and all that you remind me of my Uncle David who writes poetry and has it published in the *Tuskachee Clarion*. Right on the editorial page."

Her fingertips began a Braille exploration of my lapels.

"Young woman," I said stiffly, and perhaps a little tardily, "I will not be swayed by any blandishments, present or promised. My judging integrity remains unshaken."

There were some seconds of silence. Then she smiled coldly. "I didn't think there was any harm in trying sugar first. All right then, buster, have it your way. I'm the one who wrote that note. And killing runs in my family because my great Aunt Phoebe once shot a Yankee captain who had the gall to walk into her drawing room wearing spurs."

She went to the door, turned, and decided to restore some of the warmth to her smile. "Keep the bottle and think it over. We could get to be such *good* friends tomorrow night."

She was gone less than ten minutes when I was called to the door again. Frankly, I expected to find Gretchen, but it was a tall young man with untamed red hair.

"Ha," I said, "I suppose you want to kill me too?"

He blinked. "I wouldn't kill anybody. I'm a pacifist. Except in

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"You are refreshing. What can I do for you?"

"If you could get my painting back, I'd be very appreciative."

"What painting are you talking about?"

"*Spanscape*."

"You own the picture?"

"I also painted it. Then I lent it to Olivia, but that was before I knew that it was worth anything."

"Let me get this straight. Olivia did *not* paint the picture?"

"No. I did. And I just got a five hundred dollar offer from somebody who saw it in my studio last week and you simply can't pass up something like that. But Olivia says that she's going to keep it for a year while she's Miss Fifty States and after that she doesn't give a damn who knows or doesn't know that she didn't paint the picture."

"Does she know that you came to me?"

"No. She said she'd kill me if I did, but five hundred bucks is five hundred bucks." He looked a bit worried though. "You don't suppose she actually would kill me?"

"Cross your fingers," I said. "I'll see what can be done."

When he left I locked the door and I had no intention of answering it again that night, even if Gretchen didn't miss her turn.

The next evening at eight, Stubbins, McGee, and I were seated at the judges' table on the stage of the arena as the finals of the Miss Fifty States Beauty Contest began.

As I watched the ten girls, it seemed to me that Gretchen, Olivia, and Melissa were clearly a notch above the seven others. Perhaps that was just coincidence, perhaps it had something to do with learning how to type, or perhaps it was just because I'd seen more of them than I had the other girls.

I sighed. Two of the girls had threatened to kill me, but which one of them was actually responsible for the note?

Olivia?

She had verbally threatened to kill me, but had she written the note too or was she just taking advantage of a trend?

And there was the matter of *Spanscape*. She had not painted the entry herself and that automatically disqualified her from consideration in the contest.

Yes, Olivia was definitely out.

That left Gretchen and Melissa.

Gretchen had not come to visit me last night, but was that be-

cause she was not the letter writer, or was it because she could not get her chaperone to drink spiked milk?

And Melissa?

Had her Aunt Phoebe pleaded self-defense and been freed by a sympathetic jury or had she been sent to prison?

It was nearly ten o'clock when Stubbins, McGee, and I went into a huddle to make our decision and found that our choice was unanimous.

I stepped to the microphone and announced to the waiting world that the new Miss Fifty States was none other than Melissa—Miss South Carolina.

The usual pandemonium, of course, ensued.

Melissa broke into tears of joy. Gretchen and Olivia instantly followed suit. Gretchen hugged Melissa and *sincerely* congratulated her. Olivia hugged Melissa and said that she knew all along that Melissa really *deserved* to win the contest. And finally Olivia and Gretchen hugged each other and wept over their sheer happiness at Melissa's good fortune.

It was past eleven before I managed to get back to my suite.

There was a knock on my door.

Damn, I said, but I opened it.

Melissa stood in the doorway and she appeared to be somewhat breathless.

I blinked. Had she really meant it last night when she said that we would have a cozy little celebration?

My eyes went to the gift-wrapped bottle still on the table. I felt a bit warm. Melissa's offer hadn't influenced my decision in the slightest, but now that the contest was over—

I smiled.

"You've been so considerate," she said. "But I'm afraid that I really won't have time for our little old victory celebration tonight. A Miss Fifty States is so busy, you know. You *do* understand, don't you?"

I sighed at the vanish of a dream. "Never mind. I'll drink the whole bottle myself."

Her lashes fluttered over innocent blue eyes. "That's just it and I'm so glad I got here in time. If I were you I wouldn't touch one teensy-weensy drop of that bourbon. Because if you do, you'll get an awful, awful tummy ache. If you know what I mean?"

When she was gone, I emptied the bourbon bottle down the drain and poured myself a full tumbler of my own safe brandy.

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